

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

8 Must We Believe in the Virgin Birth?

Scripture: Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7

The Gospel of Matthew introduces the amazing story of the birth of Jesus with the words, *“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place this way.”* (RSV) The writer proceeds to tell in a simple and forthright way what happened. It is no secret that many who have read how the Bible records the birth of Jesus are under the impression that it really didn't happen that way at all. They believe that the angelic annunciation, the adoration of the wise men, the guiding star, and the conception of a child without a human father are no more than myth and pure legend. It is pretty hard to believe that someone was born that way so long ago inasmuch as it hasn't happened again in all these years. It is easy to agree with the famous radio preacher from New York who said years ago, “intelligent people (like himself) no longer believe in the virgin birth.” Everybody has their own ideas about how Jesus was born and for some it is a relief to shed the embarrassing miracle of the virgin birth that the church has been teaching all these centuries. Even the Jews, who ought to be authorities when it comes to the Scriptures, have little respect for what is said about the virgin birth. The Jewish Encyclopedia sums up the attitude of many Jews in the twentieth century with the words, “The supernatural in the life of Jesus according to the Gospels is restricted to the smallest dimensions, consisting mainly of incidents and characteristics intended to support Old Testament prophecies and the dogmatic positions of Christianity. This applies especially to the story of the virgin birth, a legend which is common to almost all folk heroes as indicating their superiority to the rest of their people.” Notwithstanding the fact that people in ancient and modern times have not believed in the virgin birth of Christ, true Christians have unashamedly accepted the record of Scripture as describing an historical fact.

I. THE GALILEAN COUPLE:

The forgotten town in the narrative is Nazareth, but here is where it all began. There is no mention of this Galilean village in the Old Testament or the Talmud. We can almost hear the sneer of the future disciples of Jesus, *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Here lived a pious hardworking man by the name of Joseph who could now begin to think of marriage, having come to at least his

twenty fifth year. Joseph was a “tekton”. This meant that he was a carpenter, but the word could take on the broader significance of a builder. Though not a part of the depressed class of society, the heavy burden of taxation meant he could not live much higher than a subsistence level. This young craftsman became engaged to a fourteen or fifteen year old girl by the name of Mary. Romance and courtship did not play a large role in these times and most engagements were arranged by the parents, sometimes without the couple ever seeing one another. There was a formal benediction over them by the consenting parents. Mary is an interesting person. She is young, comely, modest, humble and virtuous. The record is beautifully written. With the passing of time the young couple became legally betrothed to one another. At this point there was no breaking the engagement. The betrothal lasted for one year. It was tantamount to marriage. Did couples have a sexual relationship during this time? There is some evidence that engaged couples did take this liberty. However, virginity received great emphasis and importance among the conservative of the Galilean countryside.

As far as Joseph and Mary were concerned, the New Testament is most explicit on this point. At least ten times it is soberly taught that Mary was with child apart from natural generation. The Bible teaches that Joseph did not know Mary sexually until after the birth of Jesus. (Matt.1:24) Marriage proper followed the end of the betrothal year. Knowing there are three movements in the marriage relationship will help us to understand the strange language of the Bible in saying that Joseph was “*betrothed*” to Mary, that he was planning to “*divorce*” Mary, and that she is called his “*wife*.” (Matthew 1:18-25) During this betrothal period Mary's wedding plans are momentarily interrupted. She and Joseph are told that Mary was going to bear a child who was begotten by the Holy Spirit. This was shocking news for the humble carpenter and left him with a decision which could take any one of three courses. He could marry the girl immediately and hope people would not judge them too harshly for a baby born too soon. He could publicly divorce her for reason of unfaithfulness. His third choice was to set the marriage contract by betrothal aside while Mary went off some where to have her baby. The Bible teaches that an angel interposed at this point. “*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*” (Matt.1:20) This jibed with what Mary had told him. Now he could bury his suspicions and anxieties forever because of this incredible secret. The wedding probably took place in Nazareth with a week or two. They lived

happily in Joseph's house for the next several months until a Roman emperor's edict necessitated a five day trip to Bethlehem, at a time in which Mary was in advanced stages of pregnancy. It doesn't seem they would have time to make it back again so her baby would have to be born in Judea.

II. THE STORY OF MATTHEW AND LUKE:

The reason why we are able to believe in the virgin birth Jesus Christ is because this birth is recorded in the primary source records from which we have all of our other information about Jesus. From these same sources we learn of His public ministry, his death upon a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, and of the empty tomb Of Joseph as part of the information which surrounded His resurrection. Thus, we are not in the world of myth, but of authentic narration. The marks of veracity are here. There is a remarkable restraint in the presentation of what happened. This is the way you would expect someone to write who was telling the truth. Furthermore, there is not one bit of textual evidence that the accounts of the virgin birth are later additions to the New Testament documents. The oldest manuscripts, upon which the text of our modern translations rests, all contain these birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Weiss, a New Testament scholar, writes, "There never were forms of Matthew and Luke without the infancy narratives." W. F. Albright, the world's foremost Biblical archeologist, describes all of these original documents as having been written between the forties and eighties (very probably sometime between about 50 and 75 A.D.) of the first century A.D. Dr. Henry Morris writes, "There is no reason, except naturalistic prejudice, for anyone to doubt the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, and these make it very plain that Mary was still a virgin when she brought forth her firstborn son." The New Testament writers who had close and eye-witness contact with the life of Christ were well aware of the difference between myth and fact. That is why Peter wrote one day to Christians scattered all over the known world at that time, "*We have not followed cunningly devised fables when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye-witnesses of His majesty.*" (II Peter 1:16)

III. UNIQUE BIRTH CONSISTANT WITH UNIQUE RESURRECTION:

When we read about the miraculous things that happened when Jesus was born, the star, angels, shepherds, and wise men, we are made aware of truth that is consistent with all of Jesus life. Jesus is not a man with a slow leak. He doesn't fizzle. He doesn't come on strong and then break down along the way. There is

no incongruity from the beginning to the end of His life. The same supernatural elements continue and culminate with His resurrection from the dead. The closer one looks the stronger the impression becomes that all of these happenings are, in their own right, parts of a single truth...Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has incarnated (become flesh) and that ours is a divinely visited planet. Van Osterzee has stated this case and a priori argument, "In the absence of any historical record it would still be highly probable that the Lord Jesus Christ had begun his earthly appearance in an extraordinary way. How can the grape by sheer natural evolution spring from the thistle? Who can bring a clean thing from an unclean? How can the absolutely holy Jesus spring from the unholy human race by natural generation? The whole of Jesus' life testifies that He was worthy of a miraculous birth." The virgin birth and virgin life are consistent.

IV. THE SINLESSNESS OF CHRIST:

The virgin birth and immaculate conception of Jesus are vital to the Christian faith because they maintain the impeccability of Christ as far as human sin is concerned. The value of the unique birth of Christ lies in the doctrine of original sin. The overall message of the Bible is that no one who has ever been born of woman has been without a nature tainted or stained by sin. Thus original sin touches every life through the first man Adam who stands at the head of the human race. Adam contains in himself the entire human race as the forest is contained in the acorn. God reckons the human race fallen as all is the offspring of Adam. This truth is described and enlarged upon by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12,17,19. If Christ had a human father, sin reckoned through the man, would have come to Him. He would have been part of the stream of man's history, that part marred by Sin. If Christ was ever to offer Himself as a sinless sacrifice He must be equipped in a special way to remain outside of Adam's transgression. The importance of the virgin birth lies in Joseph's nonparticipation. Christ would receive no sinful nature from the man, Joseph. But that is only half of the story. What about Mary? The influence of the mother is much greater than that of the father in those 40 odd weeks of gestation. Thoughtful people for centuries have wrestled with this question. How could the sinless Jesus be born of a sinful woman even if she remained a virgin? That she was sinful there is no doubt, virtuous, pure, chosen of God, and highly favored of God, but not sinless. The Psalm 51:5 confession of David, "behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me," applies to Mary as it does to everyone else. The Roman Catholic Church seeks a solution to this problem in

the dogma of Mary's immaculate conception. This seems to remove the problem by one generation only. An equal miracle would have been necessary to protect Mary from original sin. Others suggest that Mary's human nature, unclean before, was cleansed by the Holy Spirit in the conception. In the Tabernacle every vessel was cleansed to be used in the altar of service. (Hebrews 9:21) The Spirit of holiness cannot use an unholy vessel. Mary was thus cleansed. Calvin writes, "We do not make Christ free from all defilement because He was born of His mother, but because it (the woman's seed) was sanctified by the Holy Ghost in order that the birth might be holy and incorrupt, as it would have been before the fall of Adam."

Another answer to this question could be in the creation of a body in the womb of Mary. The same God who created a body for Adam out of the dust of the ground now creates an embryo or fetus to be sustained in its life's processes by Mary. This means that at the moment of conception Jesus did not receive anything from Mary nor did He receive seed from Joseph. Hebrews 10:5 reads, "*Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body has thou prepared for me.*" We can conclude by saying that it is true that a child receives both its father's and mother's nature. Christ received from neither. The whole work was miraculous. We may be sure that it was not a strange blood that was shed upon the cross of Calvary. The blood which ran through His veins is the same as our blood, it was human blood because Jesus was born of Mary. It was the kind of blood that could atone for human sin, but it was pure and undefiled because Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Ghost and within her was "*that holy thing*". (Luke 1:35)

V. JOSEPH'S LEGAL SON:

I have already mentioned Nazareth, just a little town in Galilee. We can imagine what life was like in a little town. Everybody knew everybody else. That means that everyone knew Joseph. They knew his chosen bride. It was that kind of thing. Suddenly, the word is out. Mary is with child. The moment people learned that Joseph had taken Mary as his wife they began to say, "It's his child. It's Joseph's son." Jesus became Joseph's son in the eyes of the community, and in the Sight of the law. Mary and Joseph could then write upon the record at the temple in Jerusalem, "Jesus son of Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Nathan, son of, son of, son of...all the way back to Solomon and David." Why include Joseph at all in the story of Jesus' birth? The answer lies in the fact that Jesus came not only to be a savior, but to be a king. (Acts 1:6; John 18:37-39) To be king Jesus must be in

direct line of male succession to David. Mary was a descendant of David, but not in the royal line. She was descendant Of Nathan, another son of David. There was a curse, the curse of Coniah, upon the family of Joseph. (Jeremiah 22:30) If Jesus had been the begotten son of Joseph he would have surrendered His office of King. As a legal son He was in the line of royal succession to the throne. God has promised a redeemer-king. for the human race to be born of a woman (Genesis 3:15); the line was narrowed to the family of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3); the line was narrowed to the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:9-10); the line is narrowed to the house of David (II Samuel 7:14-16). We come to a family in Nazareth. Some say there are five boys in the family. All have Mary for their Mother. Four have Joseph for their father. Only one is fit to sit on the throne of David. (The natural implication of Matthew 13:55 & Mark 6:3 is other children.)

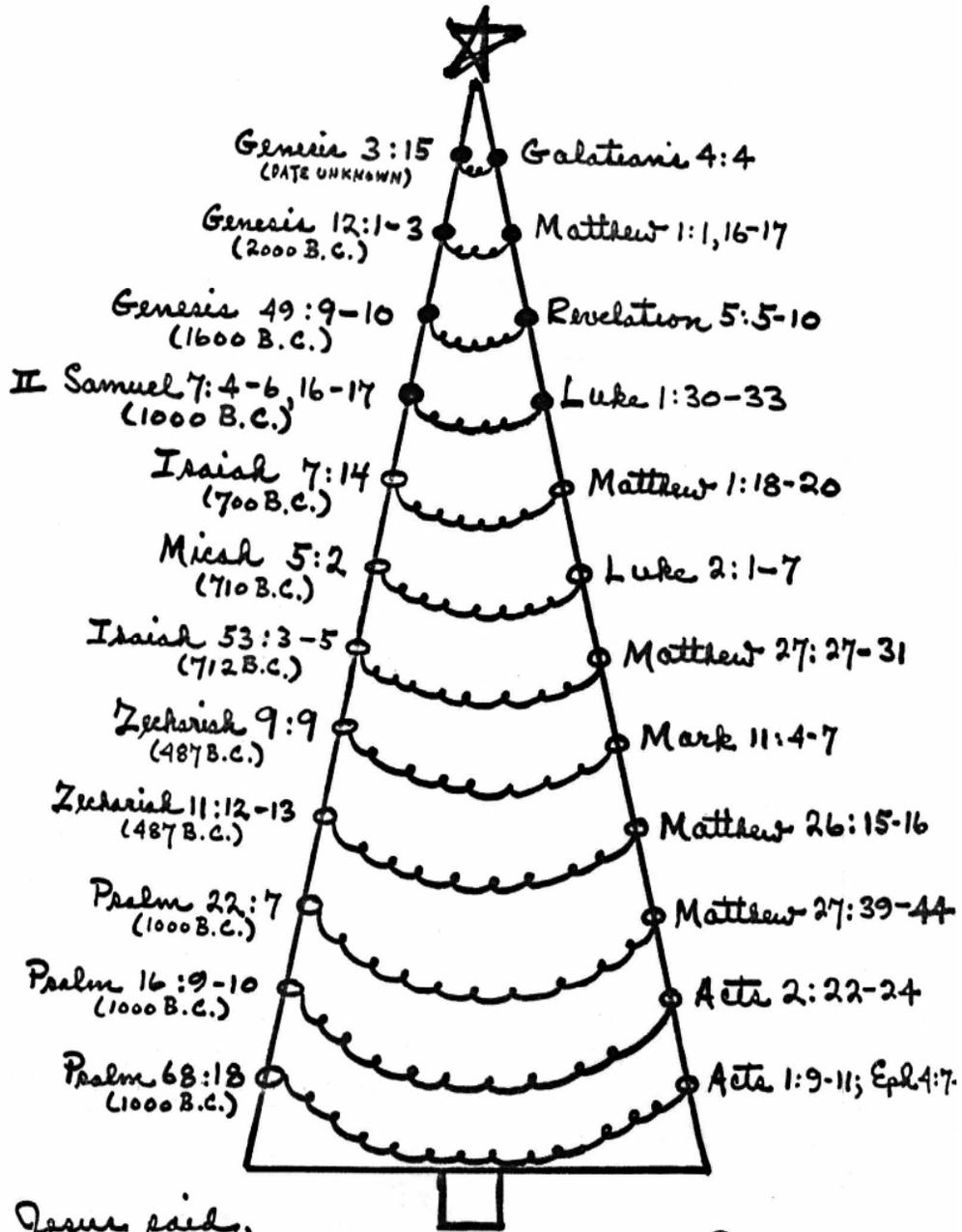
VI. A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE:

The Revised Standard Version uses "*young woman*" in Isaiah 7:14. The Hebrew word here is "*almah*." The normal use is "*virgin*." It and its derivative is used eight times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Two of these instances have no meaning on this matter. Out of the six remaining times it is used, four times it clearly means an unmarried woman, or virgin. It means the same as maiden in our language. We speak of a woman's "maiden name." The Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Hebrew O.T.) used the word "*parthenos*" meaning virgin. Matthew evidently understood Isaiah to mean virgin. Therefore we conclude the proper rendering is virgin and that the editors of the Revised Standard Version were within their rights to use "*young woman*" but it was their theological bias which encouraged the change.

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Editors Note: The following diagram was hand drawn by Pastor Christensen for inclusion at the end of this lesson.

GOD PROMISED US A CHRISTMAS



Jesus said,
 "Everything written about me in the Law, the Prophets, and
 the Psalms must be fulfilled." Luke 24:44

Notes